**‘A window to the world’: the challenges and benefits of transnational joint Masters programmes for internationalising the curriculum**

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***Introduction***

In this chapter I provide a glimpse into the ‘lived reality’ of staff and students involved in joint Masters degrees offered in two countries. The programmes I discuss required students studying Business - specifically, Marketing Communications, Tourism and Finance - to study in both the UK (London) and the Poitou region of France. In telling this story, I am drawing on 10 years experience as the International Student Coordinator for a Business Faculty with a responsibility for developing internationalisation. In this role I did not teach but my position afforded me a unique perspective on students’ experiences of this type of internationalised curriculum, that is, the joint Masters. Being involved in programme coordination gave me an insight into the multiple challenges that such programmes present as well as the huge potential they offer students for growth and learning. One observation, which I will develop further in this chapter is that my colleagues and I began with the erroneous expectation that cultural learning would happen by osmosis once students took up the opportunity to study in two countries. We came to recognise how wrong this was! The challenges we encountered encouraged me to research the experiences of students and staff in these programmes as well as develop workshops that would facilitate cultural orientation and intercultural learning.

Field notes I recorded during the first two years of the programmes’ development inform my narrative. These field notes are part of a larger data set, which I gathered for my doctoral research into joint degree programmes. In this account, I hope to offer insight into the opportunities these types of programmes afford students and staff for intercultural learning, growth and understanding, and to give ‘voice’ to that experience from an International Student Coordinator’s perspective - a voice which is rarely heard, and yet is significant in light of Leask’s (2009) definition of internationalisation of the curriculum, which I discuss in the following. Therefore, one goal in writing this chapter is to shed light on the complexities involved in engaging in projects aimed at curriculum internationalisation and in particular joint degree programmes from the perspective of an International Student Coordinator.

My inspiration and motivation to understand these complexities, and for writing this chapter arise out of reflections on Benhabib’s views on culture. To explain, if students are to benefit from the interconnectedness that the international classroom and internationalised curriculum represent, they need to be able to ‘distill coherence out of the multiplicity of conflicting narratives and practices’ and be ‘attentive to the positioning and repositioning of the other and the self, of “us” and “them” in this complex dialogue’ (Benhabib, 2002, p.41). ‘Distilling coherence’ is the challenge. The ‘interconnectedness’ of both staff and students, and thus, the experience of the joint degree is an important aspect of the learning in this type of internationalised curriculum. The emphasis on interconnectedness is devolved from the need for coherence. Where students are ‘mobile’ between two countries within the space of nine months, as part of a joint degree, linking the educational experience and a notion of enhanced diversity becomes important. This is especially relevant in an era of acknowledged cultural diversity in the higher education classroom.

In order to enhance my own narrative, I have incorporated a vignette, taken from my field notes and excerpts from a couple of interviews with students participating in the marketing course, which are representative of the views expressed by students. One of these excerpts provided the inspiration for the title above, that such courses can provide a ‘window to the world’. I am grateful for the reflections of colleagues and students who participated in the programmes – it was their reflections, which gave me an understanding of the educational process and the way that such programmes can be seen to be offering a ‘window to the world’.

In the following, I first outline briefly the institutional contexts of the joint degree programmes. Due to the constraints of this chapter I am only able to provide a small window into the many, many challenges our institutions, administrators, academic staff and students had to navigate. Therefore, I constrain this overview to issues relating to communication. This is followed with a brief sketch of the joint degree programmes within the context of internationalisation of the curriculum. I then develop my narrative with a focus on the notion of interconnectedness as a necessary ingredient in the process of internationalising the curriculum.

**How the collaboration began**

The collaboration between the institutions began with a casual conversation. Meetings followed. As collaborators we found we had a common vision to explore the possibilities for ‘international’ business education at postgraduate level. This led us to develop our joint postgraduate degree programmes. The differences between the institutions were obvious and numerous, but not thought to be so insurmountable that they would stifle the fledgling collaboration. In the following I shall relate the story of our coming together.

The French institution was small and although the students were principally French in terms of their cultural background, it had a strong international outlook when the collaboration commenced. It was located in a small French town and was part of the elite group of forty *Grandes Ecoles* (*La Conférence des Grandes Ecoles*) higher education establishments and was typical of a mid-ranking *Grande Ecole.* These Schools, established by Napoleon, are privately funded and unique to the French Higher Education system. For those who wish to pursue a career in business they are the preferred choice for their continuing education. Bourdieu (1989), describes the importance of the *Grande Ecole* and the acquisition of cultural capital for French students, which is a deeply engrained aspect of French higher education culture*.* Our French partner was ranked highly in French league tables and was accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS). It was not moderated externally, although industry advice and expertise was offered annually to each Course Leader from a panel of industry experts. Changes were made by the French institution annually in the first few years of the collaboration, in order to accommodate student observations on the need for improvement. Their resources were not stretched in the same way as most post-92 UK institutions, which was reflected in class sizes, facilities offered to students, student support, or in the marketing of their programmes. The French institution was able to respond quickly to the market, student demands and to change – a contrast to my own institution. The market ethos, which therefore underpinned the delivery of their education was unexpected for my UK colleagues.

My own institution, located in London, is very different. It is a large urban institution, at the lower end of the UK league tables and had, at the time of the collaboration, over 5000 international students. Postgraduate business programmes were mostly heterogeneous in terms of the students’ country of origin with no single group being overly dominant in number, except for the French students. The quality processes are bureaucratic and courses require external moderation.

The only real commonality between the two institutions was the desire to offer an ‘international course’ experience. The French institution was aware of the differences in standing between the institutions, but flexibility and location of the university in London were important – as well as the ‘chemistry’ and enthusiasm between colleagues on both sides that facilitated understanding and communication. Beerkens ( 2004) observes the need for ‘chemistry’ between collaborating partners to ensure longevity in an international collaboration. Facilitating administrative communication is important in the broader context of the internationalisation of the curriculum as defined by Leask (2009), as being:

The incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning processes and support services of a program of study (2009, p.209).

Thus Leask underlines for us the importance of incorporating an international dimension to the support services as well as teaching and learning processes in an internationalised curriculum.

The administration for the joint degree program demanded a great deal of communication between colleagues within the Schools and between the institutions. Even so, there were misunderstandings, and at times, exasperation as the coordinators tried to negotiate between two very different and sometimes immovable systems.

Despite these institutional and cultural differences, both institutions recognised the opportunities for offering a curriculum that better supported student learning outcomes related to the intercultural dimensions of an internationalised curriculum and the development of transferable skills and the broadening of horizons. These benefits were thought to far outweigh the challenges. The challenges faced and benefits gained are now elaborated.

***Joint degrees***

I have referred to the Masters programmes as ‘joint degrees’ because ‘joint’ denotes the aim of achieving interconnectedness within the curriculum, where the curriculum is intentionally structured on an international, cross-country and cross-institutional format for delivery. Developing this interconnectedness became one of the key challenges for the student experience. In the literature and in practice there is much interchangeability in the use of the terms such as; double diploma, joint degree, and dual degree. The terms can have different connotations in different national environments. I relied on Davies’ (2009) definition: ‘joint degree’ denotes a course or programme of study where two degree titles are achieved for a course that is jointly delivered by two partner institutions in different countries. Two Masters diplomas were awarded to students, not only because this was seen as attractive to potential students in demonstrating achievement in two countries, but also because it was the most practical approach. At present there is no international framework to support the award of single diploma delivered from institutions in different countries.

***Figure One: Joint Degree Programme Structure***



Students were recruited by both institutions and the course began for everyone in the Autumn. The student body consisted of 23 different nationalities with one third French who were recruited by the French partner.

The joint degree programmes as indicated in Figure One, were structured in four blocks and the teaching lasted nine months: firstly, students were required to complete a semester of instruction in the UK; this was followed by the second semester in France. The third block was a four month long internship and the course ended with the completion of a dissertation. The structure of the programmes afforded students significant opportunities for international and intercultural learning. However, the structure also created numerous challenges for students, as they had to navigate two quite different approaches, structures and systems of higher education. From my observations, the navigation of these challenges resulted in students developing considerable transferable skills, such as resilience and flexibility and the ability to deal with difference.

In the UK institution, the modules were taught over a semester of 12 weeks. In addition to the total of nine hours per week in class, students were required, as in many other British institutions, to undertake independent reading that would increase the hours of study to at least 40 per week.

In contrast, in the French system, common to *Grandes Écoles,* class time was an average of 22-25 hours per week (Darricotte and McColl, 2008) and students were taught in block format and covered 8 subject areas over a semester. They were provided with all their reading materials and little independent research was required or expected in this pedagogical approach. The delivery of the curriculum was therefore very different.

***Joint degrees and internationalising the curriculum***

I found Leask’s (2009) definition of internationalising the curriculum a useful reference point to better understand the international context of joint Masters degrees. At the design stage, the curriculum focused on the subject discipline and was developed by subject specialists. It was internationalised through the make-up of the student body and through the delivery in two countries. Initially, the intercultural dimension to the teaching and learning processes was absent. As I stated earlier. from my perspective these degrees began with the assumption that students would develop intercultural skills by osmosis, or as a by-product of studying in two countries; therefore there was scant attention paid to the interculturalism referred to by Leask within the curriculum. However, the failure of cultural learning by osmosis became very quickly apparent.

In order to make sense of the student’s perspective of these joint programmes, I have represented the multiple layers of complexity diagrammatically in Figure Two.

***Figure 2: Modelling the student’s perspective on internationalising the curriculum in a joint degree programme***

Figure Two demonstrates how students engage with all the aspects of internationalising the curriculum as defined by Leask (2009); that is, the subject knowledge taught in different cultural contexts, differences in students cultural backgrounds in the classroom, differences in the national cultures of the countries where the programmes were delivered, as well as differing programme support structures, and different languages in the two countries the programmes were delivered in. My own observations, however, of the situation for students and staff in the programmes suggested differing levels of engagement at an individual level, thereby embedding a complexity into the educational process that was not anticipated either by myself, or the others involved in the design of the programmes I coordinated. I observed that the differences between the institutions in each respective country, and the cultures of the host countries as well as the differences in subject knowledge had a profound effect on students. However, this varied from individual to individual. In other words, the administrative staff, teaching staff and students across the institutions coped with the differences in very individual ways and what might be seen as trifling incidents, such as a requirement to fill a form out in French caused distress for some students and was embraced as a learning opportunity by others.

The visa application process for France was an example of the difficulties students encountered. It was time consuming, frustrating and sometimes resulted in an undesired outcome; for example, a number of Russian students were refused entry visas for France or told to speak French to communicate with Embassy staff. Little thought, at the course development stage, had been given - even by the respective International Offices – to this important aspect of cross-border mobility. Developing the intercultural skills necessary to deal with such bureaucratic issues challenged all of those involved, both staff and students, and, indeed, some students transferred from the course because they found the negotiation of the visa application too stressful.

The emphasis in the French institution on a ‘client’ relationship approach was very new to my own institution. Students found this difference between the institutions a challenge right at the start of the teaching year. At the Induction, in the UK, to the largest programme, Marketing Communications, French colleagues highlighted the importance of their institution’s league table ranking. This was unexpected and uncomfortable for my British colleagues as - on reflection – it did not seem to sit comfortably with UK norms of behaviour. The issue of status seemed to have a relationship with contact hours for students. The international students recruited by the UK institution were informed by their French peers they had many more hours in class in France, which caused dissatisfaction amongst the international students. To counter differences, adjustments were made to the UK semester to give the students more classroom hours, such as a semester of French language classes. The standard format for contact hours however, could not be changed from the other Masters courses, due to university wide regulatory frameworks.

An additional problem for the UK institution was that admissions, accommodation and degree awarding powers were all managed centrally and the UK institution was not able to be reactive in the same way as the smaller French institution. The admissions process caused problems every year. For example, the UK institution would estimate student numbers prior to the start of the course, but some students would not turn up; therefore numbers were not always accurate. My French colleagues found this a bizarre process as they expected prospective students to provide a deposit or full fees prior to arrival, guaranteeing the numbers who would enrol.

The French assessment approach demanded close group working with an assessment to be submitted every two weeks. The town was small and their accommodation was within walking distance of the institution. Group non-attenders were simply fetched from the accommodation! It seemed to me that the intimacy of this environment and focus on tasks left little opportunity for students to dwell on their differences. The interviews I undertook explored this difference between assessment approaches. It appeared that acceptance of cultural difference was necessary in order to complete the task and there had been fewer of the disagreements than were evident in the UK semester. I surmised that the semester long teaching with assessments set only in the final weeks, which was the model in the UK, perhaps allowed for a non-acceptance of different modes of learning.

Arkoudis and colleagues (2013) maintain that in learning environments like ours in the UK, where students are spending less time on campus and less time interacting in informal settings it is important that academics plan and integrate within the formal curriculum learning activities that increase student peer-to-peer interactions. To address the potential for ‘non-interaction’ in the London university, first semester field-trips were introduced into the programme induction and students were required to spend three days with each other and their tutors playing games, receiving some intercultural education and interacting with each other prior to the start of teaching. These ‘residentials’, introduced after the programmes had been running for three years, were the only aspect of the curriculum that formalised any intercultural learning. Colleagues and students reported the introduction of the residential produced positive outcomes. Reflecting on my own involvement I came to see that dealing with difference, particularly cultural difference early in programmes like ours should be a fundamental part of the learning experience. In the joint degree programmes this is now an important experiential element in curriculum. The format for the delivery and learning experience enriched the educational experience of the students and offered the institutions and staff an opportunity to internationalise the curriculum at a number of different levels in line with Leask’s definition referred to above (2009).

It was often the small things, which highlighted the need for more cultural awareness. I was surprised, for example, at American students’ negative reaction to achieving what I thought were good grades. On exploring this it became clear that we had presumed that postgraduate students would be able to translate the differences between grading systems themselves and follow the guide provided in the handbook. I realised that what seemed obvious to me had caused a good deal of distress. It seemed that minor disruptions in cultural norms can produce learning outcomes but can also present challenges*.* Despite this, it was evident that the opportunities for growth, the development of transferable skills and the broadening of horizons far outweighed the challenges. The importance of being able to relate to and understand those with whom you are studying requires the development of competences beyond those that are subject-based.

A common perception on the part of policy makers is that a period of study overseas leads to the acquisition or transferable skills important in the global labour market. These can no longer be regarded as merely linked to language acquisition but have become part of a broadly defined internationally skilled graduate. The Global People competency framework developed by Spencer-Oatey and Stadler (2009) is an example of a transferable skills framework. Norris and Gillespie (2009) underline the importance of overseas study opportunities for those wishing to have international careers. However, my research highlighted the complexity and multi-layered aspects of the experience as well as the need for reflection on the coherence of the experience. I learnt that if students are to benefit from intercultural experience they need reflective spaces built into the curriculum. In those spaces, they need support as they reflect on the significance of different cultures of learning and understandings of interconnectedness, as I will now discuss.

***Cultures of learning and notions of interconnectedness***

Alexander’s (2000) seminal work on national cultures and pedagogy emphasises the importance of the interplay between culture and pedagogy. According to Alexander (2000, p. 564) “pedagogy manifests the values and demands of a nation, community and school as well as a classroom”. Alexander’s analysis helped me understand the importance of considering differences in national pedagogies and how these might impact on learning. Although the importance of culture with regard to the learning environment is widely documented, it is not always foregrounded, as our case demonstrates. Such differences add layers of complexity for academic staff and students, particularly in programmes such as ours where the time abroad is relatively short. Negotiating differing ‘cultural scripts’ (Welikala & Watkins, 2008) and established ‘cultures of learning’ (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997) within the context of one learning environment is challenging enough (Mott-Smith, 2013), but across two learning environments in the context of the joint degree this is exponentially more so. By way of simple illustration, in the Australian context, Arkoudis and colleagues (2013) highlight the challenge international students have in establishing relationships with domestic students over the course of a three-year degree. A semester long sojourn only increases the challenge.

My observation of the interactions between our students is they appeared to acquire intercultural skills through their interactions with each other, for example, when they were required to work closely with each other through their group work activities. Interestingly, Arkoudis and colleagues (2013) observed this occurring in the Australian context. Stone (2006) argues that in order to identify the benefits of the international experience, appropriate teaching methods, opportunities for staff and students to develop “global citizenship” (2006, p. 336) competencies, and an understanding of the values and behaviours of other cultures need to be developed, placing the emphasis on staff to encourage students’ interaction and in this case interconnectedness. This cultural knowledge acquisition goes to the heart of the higher education pedagogical approach, as De Vita (2000) argues. Such views also informed our understanding and development of the joint degree programmes. How students made sense of their experiences in our programmes is exemplified in the following analysis.

***The students’ perspectives***

The following excerpt is from an interview with a Canadian student. The excerpt encapsulates the views of many of the students I interviewed. The student said:

I think it’s amazing. I mean I talk to some people who complain about how things are done and it’s really easy to get your back up about frustrations but if we talk about… and one of the things I’m fascinated about is inter-cultural communications. Hello - people do it differently and that’s okay and it’s not your way. It's like - go back to kindergarten and realise that part of (pause) - if you say you want to work in a global environment you have to realise that people are going to do it differently and it’s a great opportunity, not only with the street group from such a diverse background but actually understanding that you are going to walk in, it’s like a huge home stay. You walk into 2 different cultures and say hey, this is how they do it and that’s fine. It’s different because you’re a window of the world, we’re so insular I think.

These positive and engaging comments provide an example of the initial optimism that was expressed by students on the programmes. It also allowed me insight into students’ views of an internationalised curriculum and the possibilities for cultural learning. The excerpt below is from one of the American students, who also reflected on the cultural education dimensions of a joint Masters programme.

The student related the following:

I was so excited about the opportunity to actually go and to really become well versed in the language I feel like you have to live in the place where they speak it. I guess I just thought well I’m young it’s great to have that opportunity to live in as many places as possible because it’s not really until you live there that you really understand the culture, I think. (*American Student*)

Here the international motivation and engagement with other cultures is clear. It is perhaps, also worth noting that both these students were from North America and the opportunity to study in France and the UK was important as it offered an experience of learning in two countries other than their own. Similar views were echoed by many of the other international students.

At the same time, I noted some reluctance on the part of non-French students to learn French. This was commented on by staff in both institutions and was a cause for concern*.* It seemed that learning French was not part of students’ motivation for doing the course although learning English was. Students made little use of the free French language classes offered in France. This surprised me, and made me ponder on the educational purpose of a course delivered in English taught in different countries. However, Ridder –Symeons (1992) points out that in the medieval universities in Europe, Latin was the lingua franca, so teaching in one language across different countries is not a new concept. Perhaps a successful internationalisation of the curriculum could be framed in a common language after all.

Reflecting on the views expressed, I would argue that students interactions and the experiences of staff and students provided me with a glimpse into the ways that intercultural learning can be fostered and encouraged in programmes such as our joint degrees, but also highlights the need for further research to be undertaken to understand the ‘lived reality’ (Gargano, 2010) of staff and students and negotiations in courses taught across countries and cultural contexts firstly, to understand the efficacy of such programmes in achieving their stated outcomes and in evaluating their overall potential as a model of an internationalised curriculum; and secondly, in order to begin to understand the importance of such programmes of study. I now offer the following vignette, drawn from field notes, as a way of underscoring and illustrating student negotiation in the joint degree learning context.

**Vignette – an insight at the end of teaching in France**

# I arrived in France on a beautiful sunny June day – it was the end of the formal teaching and examinations. My train was late so I was left instructions on how to get to where the students were, by the Course Leader at the French end, at the Reception. The directions were not clear and after wandering around the medieval streets for a while I could hear the sound of non-French voices and laughter. As I approached a rather beautifully renovated French house some of the students I knew came out with their cameras. As they saw me they said ‘hello’, and I was immediately propelled into the midst of their *joie de vivre* at completing their exams and finishing in France, ‘forever!’, as some said. I had arrived at their end of term ‘social’ which was being held at one of the tutors’ houses. The students were high in spirits and very happy that it was all over. (They had of course forgotten about the fact that they still had a dissertation to write and an internship to do). Many expressed to me, within a short time of my arrival, that they were very, very tired. What was clear on walking into this segment of their life was there was a lot of *bonhomie* amongst them. I can’t say how many group photos were taken but certainly of the 30-40 students who were there nearly all wanted a photo of the group with their tutor. One of the French students had brought a plain T shirt and was getting everyone’s signatures on the shirt. What was also evident was that I had walked into a ‘family group’. They all appeared very close, were comfortable in each other’s company and their different cultures no longer seemed to be a separating factor. When we were inside the house a lot wished to talk to me and I tried to say hello to as many as possible. Some commented that they had become even closer and that they had got to know everyone rather than a few select people as had been the case in the UK, where the group was a lot more disparate. This was clear just from mixing with them at this social event – the comments made to me just reinforced what I was witnessing. However, despite this engagement with each other it was also clear that many were leaving the town in France that day, almost after their party in fact. I later saw two of the Greek girls at the airport a mere three hours later. Their desire to leave France was compelling – they said they had enough! Others were leaving the day after, including the handful of French students who were there. In fact two of the French students were starting their placement in France the following Monday – it was Friday. They had decided to complete their dissertation by September so they did not have time for a break. The two Greek girls told me that they had decided not to hand their dissertation in until December, they were very clear about this and said they couldn’t – they were exhausted, and that the semester in France had been very intense.

The semester in France had facilitated the interaction amongst the students, where classes were smaller and they were dependant on each other for their social life. They had learned about others’ cultures and had established an international network of friends. This was evident from the Facebook groups established each year, which were maintained long after the end of the course and which past students used to network from all over the world.

***Reflections of dealing with difference***

As a member of staff who was involved with coordinating these programmes I observed first-hand deeply embedded differences in administration between our two institutions which presented challenges every year; such as, the transfer of credits – despite Bologna! ‘Difference’ defined our institutions and approaches. Different grading systems, different awards of credit, different deadlines and term dates were on-going issues, yet not insurmountable. The differences between the institutions’ cultures, the different approaches to the delivery of the curriculum and the different approach to the work environment, as challenging and perplexing as they were for all, afforded numerous opportunities for new learning and understandings to emerge. These experiences have shaped not only my views but, those of our institutions. These challenges represented opportunities for cultural learning. On a personal level I returned to French classes and took modules with undergraduate students in order to improve my language ability. This achieved two outcomes, one which was hoped for - the increased knowledge and ability to communicate in French, something that has since proved invaluable. The second was unexpected, but provided a valuable and experiential insight into the difficulties of understanding ‘others’ whose native language is not the language of communication. I experienced how difficult it is to understand the accents of others when one is learning a foreign language in a multi-cultural classroom. This was a revelation for me, and something I had previously not given much thought to. It reinforced my view that enhancing tutor’s intercultural awareness is as important as facilitating students’ intercultural learning.

For students, the negotiation of difference represented a challenge at every level, for many – all those who did not come from the French institution - this meant the challenge of living in two new countries for a period of nine months. This was a challenge even for those who were native speakers of English. When I explored this with some of the students at the end of their course they reflected that it had brought personal growth and that they needed to reflect on the experience in order to understand that growth.

It seemed to me that negotiating difference is an important aspect of joint degrees in as much as it presents not only the challenge but also the learning opportunity. However, in order to facilitate this learning, transparency and communication of that difference is a fundamental requirement. By this I mean that the challenges imposed by an educational experience offered in two institutions are enhanced by those institutions being based in separate countries with different cultural norms and different pedagogical approaches, but in order for these challenges to become learning opportunities the differences in the pedagogical approach, differences in national culture and differences in students cultural backgrounds need to be recognised and discussed. Wherever possible, those differences should be clearly outlined at the start. I learned that this is a delicate process for everyone involved and that it broadens the horizons of both the practitioners and the students. The learning opportunities in our students’ culturally heterogeneous classrooms in a globally mobile higher education environment reflect what Leask (2009) calls for in an internationalised curriculum.

Ironically, my final comment concerns the fact that my job has changed as the consequence of market forces in higher education. The institutional priorities which once enabled me to play a key role in developing joint degree programmes across two institutions have changed, and internationalisation – at least in the form I’ve discussed in this chapter - is no longer seen as a priority. I hope that my story will provide some insight into the challenges, but also, importantly the value of joint degree programmes and will influence practice. As for me, I am now trying to introduce a joint Masters with the United States, where the lessons I learnt will I have no doubt prove invaluable.

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